

Lieutenant Christian Burgener

214 Squadron Royal Air Force



Lieutenant Christian Burgener. Autumn 1918

Christian Burgener was born in Werdt Switzerland on 25th September 1890. The family emigrated to Canada and in January 1916 were living in Wellington, Ontario. On 7th January 1916 Christian had an Army Medical and enlisted. He was 26 years old. He was a jeweller by trade. On 27th June 1916, Christian swore an Oath of Allegiance and officially became a Canadian citizen. On November 7th 1916, Christian completed his Officer's Declaration Papers to become a member of the Canadian Overseas Expeditionary Force. On 9th March 1917 he had another Army Medical and was declared fit for overseas service.

By mid-1917, Christian was in England and learning to fly. Burgener was at Harlaxton Aerodrome, just outside Grantham in Lincolnshire. He was with a contingent of trainee Canadian pilots at the No. 40 Training Depot station. The trainee pilots learnt to fly on a number of different types of aircraft at Harlaxton. Maurice Farman Shorthorns, D.H.6s, B.E.2cs and B.E.2es and Avro 504s. Dalziel went solo on a B.E.2e on 11th December 1917 and it is probable that Burgener also soloed on the same type around the same time.

Christian would then have been posted to a second training establishment and gained experience of more advanced front-line aircraft. When he qualified, Christian would have been identified as a potential bomber pilot. He would then have gone to either RAF Manston in

Kent or Stonehenge to learn to fly Handley Page O/100 and O/400 bombers. Stonehenge was the home of the No.1 School of Aerial Navigation and Bomb Dropping.

Christian Burgener became a Handley Page bomber pilot. He joined 214 Squadron R.A.F. on 24th July 1918. He flew with the squadron on a number of missions during the final three and a half months of the war. Currently I have details of seven different missions for Christian during this time. The information coming from Raid Orders and Reports of Bomb Dropping. It is highly likely that this represents only a small proportion of all the missions that he went on with 214 Squadron.

		Aircraft	Pilot	Observer	Rear Gunner
08/08/2018	Bruges	?????	???????	???????	Lt. C. Burgener
21/08/2018	Zeebrugge - Bruges Canal, South from Zeebrugge	C3489	Lt. Burgener	Corporal Parker	Electrician Mortainan
24/08/2018	Ostende Docks?	C3489	Lt. Burgener	Cpl Obs Parker	Electrician Multanen USN
28/09/2018	Maximum Effort. 11 HPs bomb rail centres at Thorout and Melle. Trip 1	C9694	Lt Burgener	Sgt. Parker	E1 Sistar USNAS
28/09/2018	Maximum Effort. 11 HPs bomb rail centres at Thorout and Melle. Trip 2	C9694	Lt Burgener	Sgt. Parker	E1 Sistar USNAS
04/10/2018	Railway Junction at Dyne. Dell's log book says ACHP 4578	D9694	Lt.C. Burgener	Sgt. A. A. Parker	Electrician Magee USN
10/11/2018	Louvain Rail Junction and Station	C9646	Lt. Burgener	Sgt. A. A. Parker	E1 Sistar USNAS

24th July 1918. Lieutenant Christian Burgener posted to 214 Squadron at St. Inglevert.

A new pilot, Canadian Lieutenant Christian Burgener, was ordered to report to the squadron. 'On July 24 orders came to report to 214 Squadron at St. Inglevert, near Dunkirk'. Burgener arrived the same evening. He recorded in his diary 'Find out here that this is a famous squadron and consider myself very lucky'. Burgener arrived on a rather eventful day for the squadron. One aircraft crashed on take-off, caught fire and exploded. Another squadron aircraft dropped the largest allied bomb of the war so far.

'Whilst "taking-off" for a raid, machine would not leave the ground before reaching the end of Aerodrome. The machine struck long crops turning the machine completely over and pinning the occupants under the wreckage. Petrol ran onto the hot engines and caught fire. In a few seconds the whole machine was burning fiercely. Luckily, the rear gunlayer, who had broken his arm, crawled out and gave assistance to the Pilot and the Observer who were both injured. Help arrived immediately and the crew were got away. When only 40 yards from the burning mass, the 16 -112lb bombs exploded but fortunately injuring none.' Apart from Foster's broken arm, all three crew were uninjured in the crash, fire and subsequent explosions. This was a very lucky escape for all concerned. For new pilot Christian Burgener, it was probably a very sobering introduction to life on a front-line squadron.

The crashed aircraft, C9682, was due to be part of an historic mission that night, when 214 Squadron dropped the RAF's first 1,650 lb SN bomb, on the enemy at Middlekerke. This was to be the heaviest bomb to be dropped by the RAF during the war. It was 11 feet long and three times heavier than the 550lb bombs that 214 Squadron crews regularly dropped.

The following account of the effect of the raid from the 5th Group, Dover Patrol, Daily Report, *‘..(The bomb) functioned successfully and all the lights in the town immediately went out and AA fire (which had been intense) stopped and was not renewed although a subsequent photograph showed that the bomb had dropped in a field about half a mile east of the town. The crater caused by the bomb had a diameter of over 50 feet and the spread of earth displaced covered an area over 100 yards in diameter.’*

8th August 1918. Lieutenant Burgener goes on his first mission. Target Bruges. On the *‘Black Day of the German Army’*- General Erich Ludendorff.

After repeated German Offensives since 21st March, the allies finally launched a massive counter-attack against the exhausted Germans. Today, was the start of the Battle of Amiens, the opening phase of the allies’ One Hundred Days Offensive, that will ultimately lead to the end of World War I. Allied armoured divisions smashed through the once impregnable German lines. Amiens was to be a stunning victory. Around 9,000 Germans were killed or seriously wounded on the 8th August alone, and around 30,000 German soldiers were captured across the entire four day battle, along with up to 500 guns. Erich Ludendorff called it *‘The Black Day of the German Army’*.

Back at 214 Squadron at St. Inglevert on the 8th August, Lieutenant Christian Burgener, went on his first mission. He flew on a raid to Bruges, but was forced to return because of poor weather. *‘My first start today. Go up as rear gunner on raid to Bruges ... do not reach objective on account of dud weather.’* Despite already being trained to fly the squadron’s Handley Pages, Burgener would have flown his first few missions as rear gunner on an aircraft. He would have been on the rear platform, in the fuselage, just behind the wings. He would be manning the three Lewis guns that protected the tail of the aircraft from attacks by German fighters. All Pilots and Observers in 214 Squadron underwent the same rear gunner apprenticeship to gain vital mission experience before moving up to the front cockpits.

21st August 1918. Target Bruges, the Solway Works at Zeebrugge and two Aerodromes. C3492 ditches in the sea 4 miles off Nieuport. Pilot and Rear Gunner rescued after 9 hours in the water. Observer drowned.

Eight 214 Squadron aircraft started on raids tonight. Bruges was attacked by five aircraft, Ghistelles Aerodrome by one aircraft, Oostacker Aerodrome by one aircraft and The Solway Works at Zeebrugge was attacked by one aircraft. Lieutenant Burgener was flying H.P. C3489, identification code letter – G, with a very experienced observer, Corporal A.A. Parker.

214 Squadron was fortunate in having a cadre of very experienced Corporal and Sergeant Observers who could support novice pilots like Christian on their first trips over the lines. Men

such as Les Dell, Tiny Wardrop, Fred Whittaker and A.A. Parker had each completed over 55 missions by the end of the war. Sergeant Observer Les Dell completed 66 missions. They completed the equivalent of two World War 2 Bomber Command tours of duty in the skies over German occupied Belgium.

Burgener and Parker would become a good team and flew together regularly until the end of the war. Their rear gunner was one of the attached United States Naval personnel, Electrician Mortainan. C3489 was probably the first to leave on the raid that night from St. Inglevert. It was carrying a full bomb load of 16 x 112lb bombs. Their target was to the north of Bruges, attacking positions along the Bruges-Zeebrugge Canal. Visibility was very good, providing ideal bombing conditions.

One aircraft crashed into the North Sea and the crew were in the water, hanging onto the wreckage for nine hours. *'August 21st 1918. Zeebrugge, Solway Works. After making a successful attack on Solway Works, machine was badly hit by A.A. fire. Pilot made a gallant effort to get back but was forced to land in the sea, on the enemy's side of the Lines. The Observer was drowned. The Pilot and Gunlayer extricated themselves from machine and crawled to the tail, the only part of the machine above water. Soon after dawn a patrol of enemy machines flew over at low altitude, and after circling round, flew back in the direction of Ostende, no doubt to give information. Shortly after, a friendly machine on reconnaissance duly passed, the Pilot of which had had his attention attracted to the Signals made by the two helpless men. The machine (a D.H.4) returned immediately to report. In the meantime, the Handley Page had drifted still further eastwards and after a long wait of ten hours, help arrived in the shape of a flying boat, piloted by Lt. Gates, U.S.N.A.S. The Pilot and Gunlayer of the wrecked machine were taken off and landed safely at Dunkerque.'*

The plane ditched off Nieuport, just on the French-Belgium border. But the tides took Lt Fletcher's body north east along the Belgian Coast and it washed ashore in Holland. Second Lieutenant Edward Corston Fletcher was only 18 years old when he died. He was from Blackpool Lancashire. He was buried at Flushing (Vlissingen) Northern Cemetery in the Netherlands. His headstone has the sad dedication, *'Too Fondly Loved to ever be Forgotten by his Sorrowing Parents'*.

24th August 1918. Target Ostende. *'Immediately every searchlight and gun was active.'* Sergeant Observer Wardrop.

The squadron's Raid Order for the night, shows a six aircraft raid to Ostende. All six bombers have fairly experienced pilots and observers and all six are carrying United States Naval personnel as rear gunners for operational experience. Five of the aircraft are carrying either fourteen or sixteen 112lb bombs.

Lieutenant Burgener's H.P. 3489 – G, was probably the first away from St Inglevert. Once again he was flying with his experienced observer, Corporal Parker and United States Navy airman Electrician Multanen as the rear gunner. The visibility that night was poor.

28th September 1918 Target Railway Junctions. 214 Squadron drops 14 $\frac{3}{4}$ tons of bombs in one night. *'...endeavoured to do third raid but C.O. deemed it otherwise.'* Observer Sergeant Wardrop.

No. 214 Squadron will have a major role in the offensive. The previous day, on the 27th September, Headquarters 82nd Wing RAF issued *Secret Operation Order No. 113*. This allocated the targets for the squadron to attack *'as many times as possible'*, from dusk on the evening of the following day, 28th September, to dawn on the 29th. The first attacks to start *'as soon as darkness sets in'*. The squadron was tasked with attacking major railway junctions at Cortemarck, Lichtervelde and Thourout. The Germans will be sending reinforcements through these important junctions.

The first aircraft to take off from St. Inglevert, at the relatively early time of 19:10, was H.P. 4591 crewed by Freer, Wardrop and Holley. H.P. 4591 was carrying 1 x 1660lb bomb and 2 x 16lb bombs. Lieutenant Burgener's aircraft was probably one of the last ones to leave for the raid that night. He was piloting H.P. 9694 with Corporal Parker as the observer and Electrician 1 Sistar USNAS. The Raid Order has 9694 as the tenth aircraft.

It was a successful night for the Squadron. Dell noted that *'Our Squadron dropped 14 $\frac{3}{4}$ tons of bombs during the night'*. More importantly *'All machines returned O.K.'* The raids on the railway junctions were a success. The official history described the havoc that the 82nd Wing's 214 Squadron Handley Pages and 38 Squadrons FE2bs together with the 61st Wing' D.H.4s had wreaked. *'The main targets of the 5th Group bombers were the railways at Cortemarck, Lichtervelde and Thourout, and in the attacks three trains were set on fire and three ammunition dumps exploded'*. Jones, H.A. *The War in the Air*. The Official History. Volume 6. Imperial War Museum.

I believe that Major Brackley had a Squadron photograph taken to record the *'Double Raid, 14 $\frac{3}{4}$ tons Dropped Achievement'*. Thirteen of the fifteen officers that took part on the double mission appear in this photograph. One of the missing officers is the redoubtable Captain Theodore Quentin Studd.



Photograph of 214 Squadron Officers. Probably taken after 1st September 1918

Lieutenant Christian Burgener sitting on the front row, first on the right. Maple leaf cap badge.

4th October 1918. Target Ardoye and Melle. *'Returning from raid engines failed and machine crashed and caught fire. Pilot Lt Burgener. Observer Sgt. Parker. Gun Layer Elect. McGee.'* Sergeant Dell.

It was to be a second consecutive night of challenging weather conditions. There was cloud at 5,000 feet and heavy ground mists developed that make navigation and bomb dropping difficult. The primary targets for the eight bombers were Melle Railway Junction and Ardoye but the conditions meant that some crews diverted to attack secondary alternative targets instead.

Lieutenant Burgener's aircraft was one of three that ended up bombing sidings at Deynze. Burgener was flying with his usual observer Corporal Parker and Electrician McGee was the rear gunner. Burgener, Parker and McGee were to have a lucky escape that night as Sergeant Dell described in his log book. *'Extra Note. Machine 4578. H.P. Returning from raid engines failed and machine crashed and caught fire. Pilot Lt Burgener. Observer Sgt. Parker. Gun Layer Elect. McGee'*. Other sources describe the aircraft force landing in a wood, crashing and catching fire. Dell was mistaken regarding the serial number of Burgener's aircraft, it was D9694.

Christian Burgener would have a very charmed life. According to his granddaughter he crashed his aircraft on five separate occasions. Some of these crashes might have been during World War 2 when he appears to have re-enlisted in some capacity.

On the night of the 4th October 1918, over 8½ tons of bombs were dropped during the night on roads, railways and in rear. The Handley Pages of No. 214 Squadron would have dropped most of these bombs. Bursts observed on three trains at Melle junction and track out at Deynze and Ardoyne where a fire with a series of explosions was caused

10th November 1918. Target Louvain Railway Junction and Station. *‘Nearly 6 tons of bombs dropped, causing fires and explosions’* – Major Brackley’s *‘Rough History of 214 Squadron’*

The squadron’s last mission of the war was on the night of November 10th/11th 1918 when seven aircraft visited Louvain and other machines went to Namur in appalling weather. The seven aircraft that raided Louvain found the Germans in a rush to get away from the advancing allied troops. The town was well-lit and there was hardly any opposition. The squadron dropped almost six tons of bombs on the railway station and junctions causing fires and explosions.

The seven aircraft that went to Louvain were;

- C3489 Lieutenant Nichol
- D4570 Lieutenant Taylor USNAS
- C9644 Lieutenant G.S. Lewtas
- C9646 Lieutenant C. Burgener
- C9666 Second Lieutenant Belton
- C9674 Lieutenant Gaston USNAS
- C9696 Lieutenant Heatherington

11/11/1918 Target Berlin!

According to Major Brackley’s widow, there was a plan for 214 Squadron to fly on a special raid. Just before the Armistice, 214 Squadron was tasked with a very important mission. The squadron was preparing for a bombing flight to Berlin on 11th November. Confirming this 214 Berlin Bomber story, is a hand written note from Corporal W.E. Wardrop in the Royal Flying Corps Collection at the Boscombe Down Aviation Collection. It is titled *‘Pilots and Observers of 214 Squadron who were standing by to bomb Berlin.’* It names the air crew that appear in a photograph in the collection. Lieutenant Christian Burgener was one of the pilots.



No. 214 Squadron Pilots and Observers. Pilots front row. Taken after 24th July 1918

Lieutenant Christian Burgener. Front row. Second from left

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